



OFFICE of the ATTORNEY GENERAL
GREG ABBOTT

March 13, 2003

Ms. Julie Reagan Watson
Assistant General Counsel
Texas Department of Human Services
P.O. Box 149030
Austin, Texas 78714-9030

OR2003-1691

Dear Ms. Watson:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 177868.

The Texas Department of Human Services (the "department") received a request for complaints and other information relating to four health care agencies. You state that information that constitutes reports, records, and working papers used or developed in an investigation under section 142.009 of the Health and Safety Code will be withheld in accordance with the previous determination issued to the department in Open Records Letter No. 2001-5348 (2001). See Gov't Code § 552.301(a); Open Records Decision No. 673 at 6-9 (2001) (delineating instances in which attorney general decision constitutes previous determination under Gov't Code § 552.301). You claim that some of the remaining requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

You concede that the department did not comply with section 552.301 of the Government Code in requesting this decision. Section 552.301 prescribes procedures that a governmental body must follow in asking this office to decide whether requested information is excepted from public disclosure. Section 552.302 provides that if the governmental body does not request an attorney general decision as provided by section 552.301, the requested information is presumed to be subject to required public disclosure and must be released unless there is a compelling reason to withhold the information from the public. See also *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381 (Tex. App.--Austin 1990, no writ). The

presumption that information is public under section 552.302 can generally be overcome by a demonstration that the information is confidential by law or that third-party interests are at stake. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 630 at 3 (1994), 325 at 2 (1982). Section 552.101, which the department raises, can provide compelling reasons for non-disclosure under section 552.302. Accordingly, we will address your arguments.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This exception encompasses information that another statute makes confidential. You claim that some of the submitted information is confidential under 142.009(d)(5) of the Health and Safety Code. This section provides that "reports, records, and working papers used or developed in an investigation made under this section are confidential and may not be released or made public except . . . (5) on a form developed by the department that identifies any deficiencies found without identifying a person, other than the home and community support services agency[.]" Health & Safety Code § 142.009(d)(5). You acknowledge that the department is required to release the submitted state forms under section 142.009(d)(5). You claim, however, that this section requires the department to withhold the identifying information contained in the state forms. You have marked that information. We agree that you must withhold the marked portions of the state forms under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 142.009(d)(5) of the Health and Safety Code.

You assert that information submitted as Attachment C is confidential under section 142.004 of the Health and Safety Code. This section provides in part that "[i]nformation received by the department relating to the competence and financial resources of the applicant or a controlling person with respect to the applicant is confidential and may not be disclosed to the public." Health & Safety Code § 142.004(d). You explain that the information submitted as Attachment C was submitted to the department during the licensing process. You inform us that the department obtained this information under section 142.004. You state that portions of this information relate to the competence of the applicant or a controlling person with respect to the applicant. You state that other information in Attachment C relates to the financial resources of the applicant. Based on your representations and our review of the information in question, we have marked the information in Attachment C that the department must withhold under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 142.004 of the Health and Safety Code.

You also note that the information in Attachment C includes social security numbers. A social security number may be excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 in conjunction with 1990 amendments to the federal Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 405(c)(2)(C)(viii)(I), if a governmental body obtained or maintains the social security number pursuant to any provision of law enacted on or after October 1, 1990. *See* Open Records Decision No. 622 at 2-4 (1994). You have cited no law, and we are aware of no law, enacted on or after October 1, 1990 that authorizes the department to obtain or maintain a social security number. Thus, we have no basis for concluding that any social security

number in Attachment C was obtained or is maintained pursuant to such a law and is therefore confidential under the federal law. We caution the department, however, that chapter 552 of the Government Code imposes criminal penalties for the release of confidential information. See Gov't Code §§ 552.007, .352. Therefore, before releasing a social security number, the department should ensure that it was not obtained and is not maintained pursuant to any provision of law enacted on or after October 1, 1990.

In summary, the department must withhold some of the submitted information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with sections 142.009 and 142.004 of the Health and Safety Code. Social security numbers may be excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 405(c)(2)(C)(viii)(I) of title 42 of the United States Code. The department must release the remaining information to the requestor.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877)673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental

body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512)475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Cindy Nettles
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CN/jh

Ref: ID# 177868

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Renate Reibel
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(w/o enclosures)